

PRE-URARTIAN ARMAVIR

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SUMMARY

Based on the thorough examination of remainders of the Early Bronze, Late Bronze, and Early Iron Ages gained from the expedition to the monument of Old Armavir, including its hills, sacred stones, caves and a holy grove for divination, the researchers claim that the territory of the hill of Armavir was populated since the end of the IVth millennium BC. The hill was considered a holy place, and the ceremonial complex located here served as the religious center of this part of the Ararat Valley.

RESUMEN

Basado en el examen de restos del Bronce Temprano, Bronce Tardío, y Hierro Temprano descubierto por la expedición al monumento de Viejo Armavir, incluso sus colinas, piedras sagradas, cuevas y una arboleda santa para la adivinación, los investigadores afirman que el territorio de la colina de Armavir estuvo poblado desde el final del IV milenio A.C. La colina fue considerada un lugar santo, y el complejo ceremonial aquí localizado sirvió como centro religioso de esta parte del Valle de Ararat.

The hill of Armavir rises in the western part of the Ararat Valley, not far from the left bank of the Araxes, within the limits of the villages Armavir, Aikavan and Djrashen, in front of the Biblical Mount Ararat. This high (76 m) volcanic hill is the most prominent feature in the surrounding landscape.

Life on the hill of Armavir started in the Early Neolithic period and continued into the Middle Ages; for a long time it attracted the attention of both scientists and travelers. A hieroglyphic inscription dating to the 2nd mill. BC was found on the southern slope of the hill. Numerous cuneiform inscriptions of the Urartian kings were found both on the slopes of the hill and in the neighboring villages, and a bit later two rocks with Greek inscriptions came to light. The former inscriptions talked about the establishment here of the Urartian city of Argishtihinili with two citadels, of which the eastern one, built on the hill of Armavir, became a center of temple/civil society in the post-Urartian times. At the end of the 4th c. BC the city became a capital of the reestablished Armenian statehood.

Systematic archaeological investigations of the hill of Armavir started in 1962 and continued, with minor interruptions, to this day¹.

Among the goals of the Armavir archaeological expedition was to research the hill of Armavir as a long-standing cultic center of the country. Keeping that purpose in mind, the Armenian expedition in collaboration with the Italian Near Eastern specialist Giusto Traina in 1996-1999 once again turned their attention to the southern slope of the hill where rocks with Greek inscriptions and mysterious depictions were discovered.

Allow us to bring in some history of study of these rocks. In 1911 the first news of the discovery of a rock with a Greek inscription in Armavir came from the Etchmiadzin researcher Galust Ter-Mkrtychian. Following the news, several members of the Ani expedition including N.L. Okunev and N.P. Sychev along with a photographer

¹ These expeditions were headed in 1962 and 1969 by B.N. Arakelian, in 1970-1993 by G.A. Tiratsian, and in 1994 until today by I.A. Karapetian).

were sent to Armavir to photograph and measure the rock and take impressions of the inscription. In 1912 Ya.I. Smirnov, who came to Armavir for one day only, made some observations of the inscriptions on the rock, and due to the lack of time did not pay due attention to the site or the rock itself². In 1927 S.V. Ter-Avetisian³, acting as the director of the expedition, surveyed the monuments of Armavir and discovered the second rock which contained Greek inscriptions, as well as the third one which he calls "ram-shaped". This material was published in 1929 by A. Kalantar⁴ without commentary.

In 1932 the Greek inscriptions from Armavir were copied, photographed and studied by A.I. Boltunova, who subsequently published them in 1942⁵. In 1946 Ya.A. Manandian, basing his work on Boltunova's research, published the inscriptions with a new interpretation⁶. According to K.V. Trever, I.A. Orbeli and B.B. Piotrovskii visited the site in 1943 and saw the rocks intact *in situ*. It was announced later that the rocks were broken and the pieces used for some kind of a construction project. In connection with this announcement, K.V. Trever headed for Armavir and found *in situ* only the second rock, discovering in the process a new rock which contained interesting depictions. According to her description, neither the first nor the "ram-shaped" rocks were in sight. For that reason in her fundamental work dedicated to the culture of ancient Armenia, K.V. Trever⁷ bases her discussion on the description and drawings by N.L. Okunev and N.P. Sychev, which are not entirely correct. Many historians, including B.N. Arakelian, G.Kh. Sarkisian, G.A. Tiratsian, S.A. Krkiasharian and others, referred to these inscriptions in their work⁸.

Systematic archaeological exploration of the hill of Armavir started in 1962 and continues to this day. It has mostly concentrated on the territory of the citadel and town quarters. The excavations revealed a multi-leveled character of ancient Armavir, its stratigraphic picture, the functional designation of separate parts and buildings of the fortress.

Unfortunately, during this period of time the above-mentioned rocks as well as their location were left outside of the scientists' scope. Thus among the goals of the 1996 Armavir expedition was to fill this void and to once again explore the destiny of the rocks. The expedition started its work with the survey of the surroundings, starting with the southern slope and approaches to the hill, taking as a base the second rock with Greek inscriptions, found *in situ*. Many other rocks were cleared in the process; among these, three rocks with cupmarks and other signs stand out as especially interesting. According to the descriptions of the early researchers, these rocks were connected to the second rock with Greek inscriptions, and were thus to be studied collectively.

According to the description, the rocks stood at a distance of 10-12 m from each other, and were originally placed along a single east-west line. Such placement was probably conditioned by their functional designation and facilitated the observation of depictions on the rocks from all sides.

One of the rocks found by us has a prolonged concave shape (l. 2.20 m, w. 0.74 m, h. 0.90 m). The upper part of the rock contains a carving of a large oval-shaped central cup (dia. 30 x 25, depth 16 cm), around which one can see cupmarks of various sizes (dia. 9-3 cm), 10 on one side and 8 on the other. This rock was not mentioned by previous researchers.

² Trever 1953: 117.

³ Ter-Avetisian 1928: 62-63.

⁴ Kalantar 1929: 43-44.

⁵ Boltunova 1942: 35-61.

⁶ Manandian 1946: 33-58.

⁷ Trever 1953: 116-119.

⁸ Sarkisian 1960: 40-41; Tiratsian 1973; Krkiasharian 1970: 128-150.

The other rock has an incorrect circular shape; it is covered on three sides by cupmarks, rectangular indentations, elongated carvings, ladder-like carvings, straight and convex indentations with teeth-like edges. It is clear that this rock was broken and lost its original form and measurements. In form and carved signs it is identical to the third, "ram-shaped" rock, which contained on one side the now-lost hieroglyphic signs. The rock's former measurements would then be: l. 2.75 m, w. 1.76 m, h. 1.30 m; its current measurements are: l. 1.50 m, w. 1.50 m, h. 1.10 m. In his time, S.V. Avetisian⁹ ascribed pre-Urartian cultic significance to these carvings and hieroglyphic signs, and his conclusions were unanimously accepted. Thus, A.A. Martirosian compared the hieroglyphic signs from Armavir to the numerous pictographic signs from the mountains of Gegham and Siunik, dating them to the Late Bronze Age, while A. Movsisian refers them to the linear system of writing, wide-spread in the 2nd mill. BC¹⁰.

In the process of cleaning and careful observation of the third rock we realized that we once again found the rock "discovered" by K.V. Trever in 1951 and later considered lost. K.V. Trever describes the top of the rock thus: "...it is distinct from others in that its top is flat and contains a number of depictions: spiral, labyrinth-like circles by the westward edge of the rock, to the right of them – five rounded carvings of differing sized (dia. 3-8 cm, depth 2-3 cm), inside which rises – in two largest cases – a rectangle with rounded corners carved in relief and divided by carved lines into four squares; two smaller carvings contain two ovals in relief, and the fifth one (one closer to the labyrinth) contains two concentric circles"¹¹.

After comparing the rock we had found with the photographs of the first rock with Greek inscriptions from the archives, as well as the above-mentioned description by Trever, we realized that the depictions on the surface of these rocks are identical and can be said to belong to the same rock. Today the rock is 1.80 m in length, 1.21 m in width and 1.02 m in height, in contrast to its original dimensions of 2.90 m in length, 1.40 m in width of the upper surface, and 1.50 in height on the surface with Greek inscriptions. Unfortunately, after the rock had been broken its depictions could not be seen in their totality, and the Greek inscriptions were lost forever. The careful comparison of the rock and its photographs showed that both the higher southern part of the rock and its northern part were broken off. The latter had formerly contained numerous cupmarks, ladders and the depiction of a platform with a hill which K.V. Trever considered to have represented a sacred grove with the temple of Apollo, situated in the southern piedmonts of the hill of Armavir¹².

The careful cleaning of the central remaining part of the rock revealed that the depiction of the labyrinth can be seen as a human face. A human head is composed of five concentric carvings, the eyes are shown by two shallow holes, the nose is round with a central indentation characteristic for the rocks of Armavir. The mouth is shown in a rough contour, and the ears are composed of another set of shallow holes. It seems that the left ear may have been adorned by an earring depicted by three vertical holes. Despite the rough surface of the stone, one can make out contours of a jaw. A comparatively large hole is carved above the head; it is surrounded by smaller holes to its left and right. The group of holes to the left of the head is distinguished by two multi-faceted bumps surrounded by small indentations. Next to it, the convex side of the rock contains a carving of a ladder leading towards a small platform on top. Two similar ladders were carved on the lost southern side of the rock, which is clearly visible on photographs.

⁹ Ter-Avetisian 1941: 53-55, 62-63.

¹⁰ Martirosian 1974: 14.

¹¹ Trever: 118-119.

¹² Trever: 116-117.

The second rock containing Greek inscriptions was fully preserved *in situ* (ht. 1.40 m, w 1.91 m). It is worth stressing that the entire surface of the rock contained eleven carved holes of different sizes placed along a straight line with a north-south orientation. One such hole is also visible in the center of the front side of the rock. The rock contains five inscriptions, the last, lowest one of which has only a few letters left.

As we have mentioned before, the surfaces of all four rocks were covered with various cut and carved depictions. These mostly consist of cupmarks, rounded or oblong holes of different sizes (0.05 to 0.50 m). They are mostly placed in groups, thus creating various compositions. Some groups created by smaller holes were placed in an arch around a larger round or crescent-like hole. Often one can see depictions of bumps with rounded or faceted sides and small holes on top. Quite characteristic are groupings of these bumps with cupmarks, with the most interesting group reaching considerable height (first rock), which allows some researchers to see in it the Greater and Lesser Ararat.

One can often see depictions of elongated channels placed separately or connecting two cupmarks, convex straight bumps with rough edges, carved parallel lines of different sizes and the above-mentioned carved ladders. Similar cupmarks of various sizes are preserved on the rocks fallen from various parts of the hill, on its eastern slope as well as the top of the hill of Armavir.

Cupmarks and their combinations are encountered not only on the Armavir rocks, but also all over the territory of the Armenian highlands, starting in the 4th millennium BC. Such depictions were used in ritual or cult, and are encountered in both the places of cultic significance and burials. They are known from the sacred platforms dated to the 4th-1st mill. BC from Siunik, Vardenis¹³, from the cultic hearths and ceramic vessels of the Early Bronze Age¹⁴, from the monuments and mountainous regions of Shirak (Tirashen, Vagramberd, Marmashen, Shirakavan¹⁵), in the kurgans and sacrificial altars of the ancient settlement of Shamiram¹⁶, on the monument next to the village of Agarak, district of Ashtarak¹⁷, in the burial of Karmirberd¹⁸. In Metsamor these cupmarks are situated both separately on the slopes of the hill, and in the sacred places, on altars and anthropomorphic statues dated to the III-Ist mill. BC¹⁹.

In the Urartian period such cupmarks can be found on the sacred Rock of Van²⁰, on the stones with Urartian inscriptions by Menua in the museums of Van and Ankara²¹, on the stelae placed in the sacred corners of the living complexes of Argishtihinili²², and on the altar from the citadel of Teishebaini²³.

In the period of antiquity the cultic significance of these cupmarks was not forgotten. K.V. Trever suggested that they were used by oracles during fortune telling, which is supported by the votive Greek inscriptions carved on the rocks carrying the cupmarks²⁴. Similar cupmarks with the remains of a sacrifice were found on sacred rocks during the excavations of the ancient estate of Armavir²⁵. The museum of Etchmiadzin contains an ancient terracotta statuette with a cupmark-like headgear. The

¹³ Martirosian, Israelian 1971: 49, table 145, 285, 291, 292; Martirosian 1973: 19, table III, IV.

¹⁴ Khanzadian 1967: fig. 18, table XIV, XV, XVI.

¹⁵ Data kindly presented by the archaeologist Sergei Arutiunian. Tarosian et al 2002: 72, fig. 6, 8, 10.

¹⁶ Areshian 1977: 14.

¹⁷ Avetisian, Gasparian 2002: 9-12.

¹⁸ Yengibarian.

¹⁹ Khanzadian et al. 1973: 79, 87, 88, 110-113.

²⁰ Marr & Orbeli 1922: 21.

²¹ Andre-Salvini, Salvini 1995: 125-139, tables I, II, III.

²² Martirosian 1974: 107, fig. 40.

²³ Piotrovskii 1952: 21, fig. 7.

²⁴ Trever 1953: 119-120.

²⁵ Tiratsian, Karapetyan 1979: 254.

statuette's form is strikingly reminiscent of the anthropomorphic statues from the sacred grounds of Metsamor, and it testifies to the continuation of this tradition in Armenia. Terracotta statuettes of divinities with identical headgear are widely known in the world of antiquity (Asia Minor, Cyprus, Egypt, Northern Black Sea region, etc.)²⁶. The tradition of carving analogous cupmarks in Armenia continues into the cultic monuments of the early Medieval period. Thus, the stairs of stylobate of many Christian churches contain one or several cupmark-like carvings (Tekor, Ptgni, Avan, etc.).

Outside of Armenia this ritual-cultic element (on the rocks, altars, ceramic) was widespread from the IVth to the I st mill. BC on the territory of Anatolia (Chatal-Hüyük)²⁷, in the Caucasus (Natsar Gora, Amiranis Gora, the villages of Nabur Bulakh of the district of Shemakha of modern Azerbaijan)²⁸ and in Europe. Thus, they are known from the monuments of the Mousterian Era in the caves La Ferrasi in France²⁹, in Tripolie, Ukraine³⁰, Trusheshti, Romania³¹, in Northern Italy³², in Spain³³, in Ireland³⁴, etc.

The researchers of the above-mentioned monuments suggest a wide range of hypotheses on the designation of the cupmarks. Some suggest that they were left by instruments used in obtaining fire by friction, others connect them to streams of rain (heavenly waters). Others yet try to map out the location of every cupmark and thus create a configuration of some heavenly bodies (the map of a starry sky). The unifying idea behind all of these hypotheses is one of fertility, the plenty and the related concepts of fertilizing Mother-earth and the farm animals, the blossoming of the creative forces of nature, reestablishment of well-being, continuation of a human race.

Various cupmarks of Armavir, of which a part are nature-made and others artificial, give us the opportunity to see in them the unification of the above-mentioned interpretations. The marks large and medium in diameter carved in different parts of the hill and on the lower rocks could have served during the ritual of praying to the "living water of heavens", fortune-telling and as cups for sacrifices to the gods of the underworld. The "bumps", sometimes doubled, of conical or spherical form with a central dot situated inside some of the cupmarks were likely to have been connected to the ritual of prayer to the heavenly waters. They may have symbolized the breasts of a mother goddess and were connected to some type of vertically directed force³⁵. At the same time the compositions consisting of smaller marks were likely to have been connected to the astral sphere which we meet in the rock carvings of Metsamor³⁶. Small marks and bumps delineate the details of the face depicted on the first rock. This face represents the center of the composition, as its contour is composed of five concentric circles with a break in the northern side.

It is well known that a depiction in the form of concentric circles, known from the Neolithic era, serves as a sign for heaven, whereas the break is interpreted as the entrance to heaven. This symbol of heaven in all of its analogues is encountered on horizontal rocks and stones with a slight slant, where the break-entrance is pointed

²⁶ Arakelian 1952: 42, fig. 26, Ter-Martirosov 1978: 6, 7.

²⁷ Mellaart 1967: plates 22, 26, 29, 37.

²⁸ Gobedzhishvili 1951: 271, Chubinashvili 1971: 68, Muradova 1976: 98-103, fig. 2.

²⁹ Bourdier 1967: 222.

³⁰ Rybakov 1965: 26-28.

³¹ *Expozita arheologica, Bucuresti 1953, Catalogue of the exhibit: 13, fig. 3.*

³² Anati 1976: fig. 85, 129.

³³ Anati 1968a: fig. 93, 95, 100.

³⁴ Anati 1968b: fig. 68.

³⁵ Demirkhanian, Frolov 1985: 70.

³⁶ Khnzadian et al. 1973: 147-149, fig. 147, 148.

south³⁷, which gave rise to the theory that it depicted the passage for the Sun, by means of which it entered the skies and descended to the underworld. Our first rock presents the same picture for interpretation, by which we can identify the depiction with the “god of heaven”.

Many of the above-mentioned depictions with concentric circles contain carvings of ladders situated in the passage leading to their center. Ladders are also depicted on our rock. Here, in contrast to the analogues we’ve described, they are located in the central, eastern and western parts of the rock on the slope leading towards the depiction of the “god of heaven”. Such ladders are also found on the third, “ram-like” rock from Armavir, in combination with various graphemes.

A ladder in the ritual and mythological texts of various ancient peoples symbolizes a world tree, analogous to the world mountain. At the same time a “ladder” is a mytho-poetic image of the connection of the two worlds – the upper and the lower–, connecting the world of gods, humans and the dead³⁸. Thus, in the Hittite ritual and mythological texts the Sun at night descends into the underworld, and in the morning rises to heaven – the upper world – up a “ladder”³⁹. It seems that the depictions of ladders on our stone reflect the same idea. The mythological image of a ladder as the connector of the two worlds – upper and lower – was widespread among the ancient population of Armenia in the IV-Ist mill. BC⁴⁰. Rock-cut staircases leading to sacred places (platforms, caves) on the territory of Armenia can serve as a confirmation for this theory. The smaller sacred hill in Metsamor contain staircases⁴¹. The gorge of river Amberd near the village of Biurakan contains staircases carved on the especially constructed pyramidal cultic hill⁴². In Elpin (district of Eghegnadzor) staircases rise up the mountain to the upper cultic platform above the cave⁴³, whereas in Azhdahak-yurt (mountains of Gegham) they lead down the slope towards a vishapakar. In Agarak (district of Ashtarak) the south-eastern part of the sacred mountain contains numerous ladder-like carvings. The staircases cut in various parts of the Rock of Van⁴⁴ prove that these mythological ideas were in full force in the Urartian times as well. At the same time, the carving of the Greek votive inscriptions on the first rock testifies to the continuation of these ideas into the classical era.

Veneration of rocks was a wide-spread practice among many ancient peoples. In their belief system the rocks represented a concentrated essence of the earth; they were associated with the strength and might of the god of the earth, and called “bones of the earth”⁴⁵.

Originally the rocks in their natural state were considered incarnations of deities, and were thus venerated (Hittites, Hurrians, Greeks, Druids, Arabs and others). The Torah states that first altars were constructed of unfinished stones (The Bible, Genesis 8: 20, 22:9, 26:25, 30:20, etc.). With time they were cut into a rectangular or conical form, to imitate “the sacred mountain” considered, in its turn, the top of the head of the god of earth. In Abkhazia there is a conical rock situated by the village of Pskhu. This rock was considered sacred. It was associated with the dwelling of the god of the underworld⁴⁶. The Arabs considered a rock of conical form a sacred fetish and was

³⁷ Golan 1994: 127, 129, figs. 250-255, 258, 259; Krupnov 1939: fig. 4; König 1966: 146-154; Karakhanian, Safian 1970: fig. 69 (4), 205.

³⁸ Jobes 1962: 961, 1483-84, 1494.

³⁹ Dovgialo 1971: 83.

⁴⁰ Martirosian 1978: 90, table 10.

⁴¹ Khanzadian 1973: 145, fig. 148.

⁴² Gevorkian, Petrosian 1992: 20-21, table XX.

⁴³ Data kindly presented by Usik Menkonian.

⁴⁴ Marr, Orbeli 1922: table XXVII.

⁴⁵ Jobes 1962: 1495.

⁴⁶ Golan 1994: 207.

called “house of god” – it is obviously a miniature version of the sacred mountain, a dwelling of the god of earth. In Canaan a stone cone was considered the symbol of the god of the underworld and the god Baal. In the Middle East conical black stones were considered incarnations of a divine phallus⁴⁷. According to Tacitus, the temples of the East and Cyprus in the classical era preserved the veneration of idol stones. In the temple of Venus of Pathos the goddess was symbolized by a round rock with a conical top⁴⁸. It is thus not surprising that the second rock in Armavir carrying Greek inscriptions has a natural conical form, with cupmarks placed along its ribs and on the top.

According to these statements it becomes obvious that the rocks of Armavir were also subjects of worship symbolizing the “deity of the earth”, while the depiction of the “face of the god of heavens” on the first stone symbolizes the connection of the two deities – those of heavens and earth – aimed at provision of fruitfulness, well-being and blossoming of life.

All over the ancient world sacred rocks-stelae were placed in sacred groves, by sources of water or on the mountain, thus representing the connection of the tree, rock stele and the mountain with the idea of the center (axis) of the world. The Hittite texts talk about the stele of the god of Thunder placed in a sacred grove, in Phoenicia a conical rock (*bet-il* – house of god) dedicated to Astarte, stood in a sacred grove, in Etruria a stele was placed near the mountain of Sarakta, in a sacred grove⁴⁹.

Thus it seems logical that the sacred rocks discovered in Amravir must have stood among a sacred grove as well. This is further corroborated by the writing of the Armenian historical Moses of Khoren, who mentioned the existence of a sacred grove there⁵⁰, as well as the data provided by A.D. Eritsov. The latter states that during his excavations in Armavir he found “deep inside the earth”, by the southern slope of the hill, the trunks of poplar trees⁵¹.

Sacred groves with sacred rocks represented high deities which were in charge of destinies and at the same time acted as fortune-tellers, oracles. Assyro-Babylonian sources mention the existence of Assyrian and Urartian oracles⁵²; such oracle texts were plentiful in the Hittite world⁵³. The Nemean priestess’ dwelling was inside a sacred grove⁵⁴. In Abkhazia the cult of the goddess Kodosh was expressed in the veneration of a sacred grove dedicated to her⁵⁵, and we may also mention here the well-known example of the Delphic oracle⁵⁶.

The sacred grove in Armavir with sacred rocks was a place of divination as well. Moses of Khoren informs us not only about the divination by reading the whisper of the leaves, but also that by divining the direction in which the leaves of sacred planes point. He further talks about the high priest Anushavan, “highly gifted and most skillful in business and speech”, dedicated to the planes of Armaneak⁵⁷. We should note here that the plane trees were dedicated to Armaneak, the son of Haik, thus the grove must have existed seven generation before Anushavan. Possibly Aramais, after building a city, planted the grove in honor of his father Armaneak. K.V. Trever and other researchers

⁴⁷ Golan 1994: 21.

⁴⁸ Tacitus, *History* vol. II, II, 2.

⁴⁹ Gerni 1987: 134; Ardzinba 1982: 9.

⁵⁰ Moses of Khoren, *History of Armenia* I, 20.

⁵¹ Uvarova 1887: 215.

⁵² Diakonov 1951: 332 (309, 385, 393), Piotrovskii 1959: 223.

⁵³ Ardzinba 1982: 96, Gerni 1987: 141-143.

⁵⁴ Frezer 1983: 164.

⁵⁵ *Mify Narodov Mira*, vol. I, Moscow, 1981: 604.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*: 95.

⁵⁷ Moses of Khoren, *History of Armenia*, vol. I, 20.

conclusively demonstrated the continuation of ritual activities here in the classical period. The establishment of these sanctuaries was prescribed to Apollo⁵⁸.

It is well known that since times immemorial caves were also considered sacred. A cave is a part of the complex of life and death of fertility, as a place of conception, birth and burial all at the same time. At the source of cave worship is the notion of their connection with the gods of the earth and the underworld. It serves both as the earth's bed and a grave. The dying and resurrecting god of fertility goes into a cave and enters the depths of the earth, thus a cave is perceived as the dwelling of a god, a sanctuary. A cave sanctuary represents model of the Universe. According to some sources, in order to worship Mithra Zoroaster erected a cave in the likeness of the Universe, created by Mithra himself⁵⁹.

A bright example of this are cave temples of Yazilikaya, which had existed before the formation of the Hittite state, and were later reconstructed into a temple complex of the Hittite state religion⁶⁰. Analogous cave constructions are known from Asia Minor (Paphlagonia, Phrygia), Greece, Palestine, and were considered as temples and burials at the same time. To this we can add numerous cave constructions of Van, Kayalidere, Altin-tepe, Maku, and others⁶¹.

Natural caves could be found in many parts of the hill of Armavir; in the past their number reached twenty. As a result of weathering of the unstable volcanic hill, these caves were damaged considerably, so that today only about ten are visible. One of the caves located on the southern slope of the hill of Armavir and facing to the presumed location of the "sacred grove", continues to serve as a sanctuary to this day, under the name of "Tsaghkavank" – "temple of the flower".

Another well-preserved cave is located on the south-eastern slope of the hill, at the height of 28 m from the foot of the hill. It contains a large oval room with a vaulted ceiling (length 15.0 m, width 7.20 m, height 3.50 m). Both the walls and the ceiling show signs of work. The entrance is carved in the rock on the eastern side of the cave (width 3.0 m, height 1.40 m). The second entrance into the cave is located on its southern side (width 4.0 m, height 2.50 m); it probably connected this cave to another, adjacent cave, traces of which are clearly visible. There is an opening on the southern side of the cave. Similar openings can be seen in Urartian caves near Arsenal and Ichkali on the Rock of Van and Geghovit on the south-western shore of the lake of Sevan⁶².

The lower platform of the eastern slope of the hill of Armavir, where the above-mentioned cave is situated, rises up in six terraces, as if representing a natural ziggurat. The platforms of these terraces are worked and covered with large and small round, oval and trough-like depressions, some of which are connected to one another by thin trenches. One can additionally trace the work on the exit from the rock, in the form of wide steps, platforms and small plinths. All of the depictions we have described are connected to each other by a certain internal logic and order; they rise up and are completed by the vertically worked rock. This rock serves as the eastern wall of the room carved on the summit of the eastern part of the hill.

The room is rectangular in shape, with the measurements of 3.60 m x 3.20 m. The interior eastern wall of the room is about 1.00 m high, and the remaining western wall is about 0.20 m high. The protrusions on the northern and southern parts of this room are worked into the shape of a two-stepped pedestal (3.60 m long, corresponding to the length of the room, 1.00 m wide, 1.80-2.00 m high). The northern pedestal was

⁵⁸ *Mify Narodov Mira*, vol. I, Moscow, 1981: 164.

⁵⁹ Porphirius, *O Peschere Nimf*, 6.

⁶⁰ G. Macqueen 1983: 129-131.

⁶¹ Piotrovskii 1959: 210.

⁶² Piotrovskii 1959: 261, fig. 65; P'iliposian, Mkrтчian 2001: 15, table 2.

unfortunately preserved quite poorly. The central part of this room, almost to the entire length of the room inside the rock, is occupied by an elongated natural fissure, oriented east-west. The southern and northern extremities of this fissure descend in three uneven steps inside the mountain. The length of the fissure is 3.00 m, its width in the middle part is 0.60 m, and the depth is unknown. Unfortunately, the whole territory around this room was poorly preserved, worn away by time, with the north-western part destroyed during the construction of a water cistern. The thorough examination of the location even today yields traces of floors and walls of other rooms carved into the rock. All of them are situated around the room described above, and apparently constituted a part of the thirteen rooms mentioned by S.V. Ter-Avetisian⁶³. The floors of all these rooms are on different levels, and were originally situated below the level of the central room, regardless the fact that all of the rooms together composed undoubtedly a single cult complex. We believe that the erection of this complex was conditioned by the presence of this natural fissure in the central room.

From an ancient man's point of view, a fissure in the earth connected the middle and lower structures of the world. These fissures served as connectors to the gods of the underworld which dwelled in the bowels of the earth (caves, mountains). The souls of the dead descended upon them into the underworld; they were recipients of the sacrifices to the lower gods and the souls of the deceased. Cultic rituals were conducted around these fissures, sacred zones established, often constructions erected to represent a similar idea in the ancient world. Thus, in many ancient Near Eastern cities temples were constructed at an elevation, the centers of which were represented by the fissures called *Dur-an-ku* – the connection (door) between heaven and earth (or the underworld). This was the name of the central part of the temple to Enlil Enkur (E = house, kur = mountain)⁶⁴. According to the Assyro-Babylonian beliefs, Babylon was founded upon the "Bad-absi (The Gates of Absi, where Absi represented the primeval chaotic waters of the underworld). The temple of Jerusalem, in its turn, was built on top of the fissure of Tekhom (the world abyss), and is called "the fortress of the mouth of Tekhom". The Etruscans and the Romans called such fissures "mundus"⁶⁵, from the Etruscan root "manth". This root is at the base of the name of the Etruscan god of the underworld, Mantus. Besides natural fissures, the Etruscans, when establishing a city, created its center artificial pits, in which they placed first bits of harvest and the earth brought from the place of previous dwelling"⁶⁶.

In Greece, sacred places also contained fissures, over which the oracle-priests presided on their tridents (Delphi, Delos, Didima, etc.)⁶⁷. In countries like Afghanistan, Pakistan and India, such fissures are called *Dur* or *malosh* (molosh – molokh), and the well-preserved ethnographic data of Hindu-Kush clearly demonstrate the ancient religion in its primordial state. Around these fissures, on a narrow rocky crest with steep slopes stone constructions-sanctuaries were constructed in the open air. They were made up of stone blocks or boulders, which were sometimes worked, assuming a meaningful form and serving as a part of the sacred zone. The complex in general included hearths, sometimes separate for the bloody and bloodless sacrifices, cupmarks or tub-shaped depressions for "praying to the life-giving heavenly waters". The focus of the complex was a fissure – opening in the rock, which was considered to be an entrance to the third world, the world of the deities⁶⁸.

⁶³ Ter-Avetisian 1928, No. 1: 3.

⁶⁴ *Mify Narodov Mira*, Vol. II, 1988: 653.

⁶⁵ Ovid, *Fasti*, IV: 321 ff.

⁶⁶ Plutarch, *Izbranniye Zhizneopisaniia*, vol. I, Romul XI, Moscow 1987; Nemirovskii 1983: 176.

⁶⁷ Polibius, book IV, 65; Tacitus, *The Annals*, book II, 54; Cicero, *On Prophecies*, book I, 65; *Mify Narodov Mira*, vol. I, 1986: 95.

⁶⁸ Ittmar 1986: 382.

The eastern sacred complex of Armavir is not the only one on the territory of Armenia. Sacred places in Taron, called Innaknia (“nine sources”) or Glak served the same purpose. According to the ancient historian Ovan Mamikonian (Zenob Glak) pagan temples had been constructed in these places since ancient times, and were dedicated to Gisané and Demeter. They were placed by water sources, above a fissure called “the gates of hell” – “the gates of sandaramet”⁶⁹. The latter was the name of the god-spirit of the underworld, as well as the subterranean kingdom itself⁷⁰. It was conclusively proven by S. Harutiunian that the second name of these places, Glak, also means “eye- hell- gates of the devs”⁷¹. In these places, like in Armavir, a temple or altar to Demeter was placed on a fissure in the eastern part of the mountain (sacred), where the underworld cellae of the house (caves) were situated. Later this hill was called “the hill of the Sun”, and Armavir housed both the temples to the Sun and the Moon.

After the official introduction of Christianity to Armenia, the places of many temples were taken over by chapels and churches. Thus, the chapel of Sacred Resurrection was built in place of the temple to Demeter-Gisané⁷². Srvandztian mentions the identical fissures-holes in the monasteries of St. Kononos, Holy Spirit in Vaspurakan and in Aghdznik⁷³. These sacred places were supposed to guard entrances to these fissures in order to prevent evil spirits (former gods) from coming out and harming people.

Everything we have mentioned above, as well as the parallels brought to your attention allows us to suggest that the eastern slope of the hill of Armavir, together with the complex around the fissure served as a sanctuary where cultic rituals and ceremonies were conducted. At the same time, the sacred rocks, caves, staircases, the fissure and the sacred grove with oracles along with other artifacts shed light onto the worldview of the population inhabiting this part of the Ararat Valley.

As a result of the examination of stratigraphic levels of different monuments on the territory of Armavir, varying in type and chronology, as well as the analysis of materials obtained during their study, a large amount of information on the chronological history of the monument was obtained. Thus, already during the first excavations in 1880 by A.D. Eritsov and A.S. Uvarov a huge quantity of obsidian core, fragments of beautifully worked knives⁷⁴ and ceramic material were discovered. These discoveries were studied by B.A. Kuftin. He singled out a group of beautiful, characteristic ceramic samples dated to the III mill. BC⁷⁵. The material excavated in 1973 on the eastern slope of the hill is dated to the same period. Discovered here was a corner of a room with rammed floor, an ash-filled hearth made of rough stones covered with clay. Stone tools, characteristic black polished ceramic ware and a clay statuette of a bull were found in the room⁷⁶. Such statuettes are only known from Early Bronze Age settlements, and are dated to the end of the IVth-beginning IIIrd mill. BC⁷⁷. In 1996, traces of Early Bronze Age settlement were also discovered at the southern foot of the hill. Here, not far from the “ritual stones” we described above, under the Urartian level, at the depth of 2.30 m, the researchers found a part of a room with rammed floor.

⁶⁹ Mamikonian 1989: 20, 43.

⁷⁰ *Mify Narodov Mira*, Vol. II: 466.

⁷¹ Harutiunian 2001: 21-22.

⁷² Srvandztians 1982, vol.2: 94, 474.

⁷³ Srvandztians 1987, vol. 1: 75, vol. 2: 14.

⁷⁴ Uvarov, 1910, vol. II: 143-146.

⁷⁵ Kuftin 1943: 92-95, Table XXIII.

⁷⁶ Tiratsian 1974: 174.

⁷⁷ Esaian 1960: table 4, 6, 7, 5 (1,2).

Fragments of black polished ware and a flint insert from a composite sickle were found scattered on the floor. Specialists date these fragments to the Early Bronze Age⁷⁸.

Highly characteristic material of this period was also revealed during systematic excavations in the hills of Nor Armavir, which allowed A.A. Martirosian to talk about the existence of settlements on these hills, and date it “to the time ... when the culture of Early Bronze Age blossomed throughout the Ararat Valley” – end of IVth – beginning of the IIIrd mill. BC⁷⁹.

The most ancient settlement on the territory of Armavir belonged to the series of typical Early Bronze Age sites which covered Armenia like a thick net. People living in these settlements were experienced farmers, cattle-breeders, artisans (working the stone, clay, copper, wood, fur, leather, bones, etc.). They constructed sanctuaries for carrying out ritual activity on top of the hills and rocky platforms. Such purpose was served by the hill of Armavir, which occupies a prominent position above the valley. Large platforms made up of soft volcanic lava allowed to be carved with various depictions of cultic significance, above-ground and subterranean rooms. The above-mentioned surfaces of the summit and the eastern slope of the hill, covered all over by various depictions, cupmarks and caves, serve as proof for this designation.

The study of the hill of Armavir showed that life here continued into the Late Bronze Age period. Periodically (in 1927-1929, 1935, 1967, 1986) its slopes yielded discoveries of burials whose materials find exact parallels in the archaeological complexes of the monuments of Armenian Piedmonts and neighboring countries, dated to the IInd-beginning Ist mill. BC⁸⁰. At this time, the tradition of constructing artificial caves and rooms inside the rock continued: a cultic complex built over the fissure received its final architectural look. The plan and finish of this complex is reminiscent of the sanctuary of Metsamor and other monuments of this period. The “ram-shaped” rock with a pictographic inscription is connected in date to this complex. Various signs appearing in the inscription, in the form of stylized human figures, flying birds, sun discs, lunar crescent, angular lines, and squares are analogous to the numerous signs of the Gegham and Siunik mountains, Metsamor and others dated to the IInd - Ist mill. BC. They undoubtedly had a religious significance.

Thus, the entirety of the data allows us to state that the territory of the hill of Armavir was inhabited from the end of the IVth mill BC. Here we registered settlements with developed material and spiritual cultures of the Early Bronze Age, Late Bronze Age, as well as Early Iron Age. The cultic complex which functioned here on the eve of the Urartian expansion served as a religious center of this part of the Ararat Valley (the country of Aza).

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⁷⁸ We are grateful to P. Avetisian and R. Badalian for consultation.

⁷⁹ Martirosian 1974: 10-12, 69.

⁸⁰ P'ilip'osian 2001: 13-19, table I, II; Martirosian 1974: 15, fig. 4.

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